

# Mahaweli Development Scheme & State-Aided Colonisation of the Eastern Province

The Mahaweli Development Programme, accelerated from 1977, was the largest infrastructure and land-settlement scheme in post-independence Sri Lankan history. Its System B, C, and L command areas overlapped substantially with the Tamil-majority Eastern Province. State-aided settlement of these areas with Sinhalese families from outside the province — within the legal framework of the 1935 Land Development Ordinance and successor instruments — is the most extensively documented post-1977 example of administrative demographic change in the Tamil-speaking north-east.

---

Mahaweli colonisation is the policy most closely associated with the structural argument that the Sri Lankan state has, over decades and through ordinary administrative instruments, altered the demographic composition of the Tamil-speaking north-east. The argument does not rest on the Mahaweli scheme alone; it rests on the documented combination of state-aided colonisation, military land seizure, archaeological reservation, forest reservation, and Mahaweli command-area settlement, all operating within the same provinces.

## §1 What it did

The Mahaweli Programme, accelerated under President Jayewardene from 1977, channelled the Mahaweli Ganga river system into command areas covering parts of Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura, Matale, Kandy, Badulla, Moneragala, Ampara, and Trincomalee districts. Systems B, C, and L overlapped substantially with the Tamil-majority parts of the Eastern Province (Trincomalee and Ampara).

Settlement within the Mahaweli command areas was state-aided under the Land Development Ordinance 1935 and the Mahaweli Authority Act 1979. Allocations were administered centrally, not by the Eastern Provincial Council (which did not exist until 1988 and has never held effective land powers — see </case/frameworks/indo-lanka-accord-1987>). The composition of settlers was documented in successive PEARL (Withering Land 2017, Erased 2024), Oakland Institute (Endless War 2024), and Centre for Policy Alternatives publications as predominantly Sinhalese, drawn from outside the Eastern Province.

## §2 The wider land architecture

Mahaweli colonisation is one of several mutually reinforcing land instruments. The Forest Department, the Wildlife Department, the Archaeology Department, the Mahaweli Authority, and the Land Commissioner's Department each operate under central authority within the Tamil-majority north-east. Tamil land claims processed through the Office for Reparations (Act No. 34 of 2018) and the Lands Commission have produced documented but small-scale restitution (e.g. the 672 acres released in Keppapilavu in 2018) against substantially larger continuing allocations and reservations.

PEARL's Erased (2024) and Oakland Institute's Endless War (2024) document the cumulative effect across the Eastern Province: Grama Niladhari divisions that were Tamil-majority in 1981 are no longer so in successive enumeration. This is the empirical observation that the Demographic-Displacement Function  $D(r,t)$  on </case/mathematics/ddf> indexes.

## §3 Why it sits at narrowing-step 10

Step 10 in the Narrowing Timeline is the consolidation of administrative demographic change in the Tamil-speaking north-east as a continuing post-1977 instrument. It sits alongside the PTA (step 9, same era) — the legal-detention companion — as the documented apparatus through which the post-1977 unitary state operated on

the Tamil-speaking north-east in the period leading into the conflict, and which continues in modified form into the current era.

## Sources

- PEARL, Erased (2024).
- PEARL, Withering Land (2017).
- Oakland Institute, Endless War (2024).
- Centre for Policy Alternatives, Land Restitution and the State in Post-War Sri Lanka.
- Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka Act No. 23 of 1979.
- Land Development Ordinance No. 19 of 1935 (as amended).

## What this is not

- This article does not name any individual settler, scheme officer, or land commissioner.
- This article does not assert that any individual Sinhalese settler is responsible for the structural pattern. The mechanism documented is administrative and policy-level, not individual.
- This article does not aggregate land-area or settler-count figures in TLTE voice. All quantitative claims are attributed to PEARL, Oakland Institute, or CPA.
- This article does not advocate the displacement of any settler community. The Charter's structural refusals exclude any TLTE call for ethnic relocation.